

On Haiku

From the writing of Helen Shigeko Isaacson an article meant for Le Monde, so it says in the autograph of the author. Also: „For translation into German (?), Dutch (?).“

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March 2010

For Translation (German?)
Guedi (?) Memoir for Seikensho
H.S. Isaacson

The ancient story of the great Chinese poet Po Chu'i's visit to Japan to measure the wisdom of the Japanese for the T'ang emperor tells that the first person he met as his boat approached its shores was an old fisherman. He asked, "What do people of Japan practise and take delight in?" At which the fisherman replied, "Well, in China what do the people practise and take delight in?" Po Chu'i replied- "In China, we write Chinese poetry." The fisherman said, "In Japan, by writing Japanese poetry people's hearts are consoled." "And what is Japanese poetry?" inquired the Chinese poet. The fisherman answered, "We take India's sacred letters and China's poetry and harmonize them; hence we call our poetry the great harmony (Yamato uta). But let us have an example of your poetry."

Po Chu'i recited: "White clouds like a sash encircle the mountain's
hips,
Green moss like a garment covers the boulder's
back."

The fisherman replied with a Japanese poem:

"In (a) moss garment / dressed, the boulder / without having one,
for the silk-clothed mountain / a sash it makes."

The admiration of the Chinese poet was great; he returned to China to report that Japan was not a country to be subdued. This was in the times when in both China and Japan the heads of government were people accomplished in poetry, which was a test of high understanding and benevolence. Such a selfless government, they thought, could help the people develop so that the country would be glorified. Indeed, harmony is an essential element, and Japan was fortunate to have incorporated harmoniously the three great schools of thought, Confucianism, Tao and Buddhism.

From the beginnings of Japanese poetry a question-answer way of writing existed, in which one person wrote the first half (5-7-5 syllables) and a second person completed the poem by adding two lines of 7 syllables.

By the end of the 14th century, however, this was extended to a hundred ku (phrases) of 5-7-5 and 7-7 alternating, and often more than two people participated. This was called renga, a series of linked verse, out of which haiku finally emerged. The usual renga, the point of which was to show the eternal changes of the universe, started with a verse of 5-7-5, but special exercises were devised in which a line of 7-7 was given to write the 5-7-5 ku to. For example,

In the direction of the right
beach plovers are crying

A fishing hook
at Saho(rod) riverside
in the evening fog.

Just a step before the haiku, and most interesting in the light of what Basho himself was to say about the heart of his school. The way in which renga were written was in itself a rigorous practice---a group of people coming together and composing, as speedily as possible. Many of the participants were Buddhist monks. By the end of the 15th century, Soogi had stated that the first ku of the renga (hokku), whether it be of birds or flowers, must contain the very feel of the air of the season.

Hokku, the rising ku, is a term taken from Chinese poetry, and means the same: the first line of four, which makes rise an object. In fact the terms given to the lines of Chinese poetry were adopted for the first four ku of the 36 of Basho's renga with the same meaning except for the last (rising, determining, turning, meeting), because the fourth ku in a renga must be extended to the fifth. From a Basho school renga:

In the marketplace / the smell of things ya / The Summer moon

"How hot, how hot" / gate after gate's voices

The 2nd rice-paddy weeding / no sooner done when / the ears came out

Pat the ashes off / a round-herring

The hokku makes the object arise, in this case the Summer moon; the second ku acknowledges the object by fixing it fully in place. The third ku shows a turning from that object to the rice-paddy and suggests more objects to be introduced, in the way that the ears of rice appear. The fourth ku, while continuing the idea of food, makes way for all the changes to come in the scattering of ashes and yet another change in the general setting.

The hokku must be of such nature and proportions as to expand to 35 more ku, while ^{it} itself is so brief. How can it be a limited, personal human experience then? It must be a vast, unlimited universal or at the very least some common ground to which anyone can write the second ku. According to the Japanese of the 18th and 19th centuries it "has the form of the original beginning" and therefore must have two opposing parts or polarities-- the yang and the yin, the hard and the soft, the outbreath and the inbreath which exist in everything. In the Hairon of the Bashō school it is said "doing haikai is to play between the void and the material, the formless and the form, heaven-earth and man, whereas Japanese poetry harmonizes the extence between them." The haijin therefore plays and rambles (hai) and is attached to no one, place or thing. If he practises this, he will be able to enter the realm where the large is no different from the small.

In Basho's words, "The two words--take the center--can be said to be our school's secret dharma. If people well master this principle, the government of an empire would be luminous and the people will understand their work from morning to dusk". To show what he means by taking the center, or the central point of interest in the ku, Basho lists the middle points of the first 8 ku of a renga:

first cherry flowers

lacquered wicker hat

shop curtain

passing shower

heron

learning-calligraphy child

the moon

new rice wine

If the reader will look back to the exercise of writing a 575 to a 77, he will see that the 575 is taking the middle point of the 77.

All of this is based on a deep principle of Mahayana Buddhism that the one true becomes and is no different from the infinite, and that words can only by taking the in-between point to what is the real of or the indescribable. The mysticists of the 13th and 14th centuries in Europe approached and perhaps understood this principle. It is a point not to be reached if one is giving way moment after moment to his weaknesses and binding, blinding sentiments. How, without long and continued training in sorting the facts from the fictitious, the actual against what appears to be through the fallible senses? A good part of their training was directed at undoing the accumulation of misconceptions. Rambling through the countryside on foot, they could see the world of nature and the world of human relationships from apart. The world of human relationships as such is what senryu (a 5-7-5 verse in comic spirit) is about. The world of haiku is the universe with its changes throughout the seasons, in which man has a role just as the sentient being endowed with the most intelligence between heaven and earth. ||

That Basho invented haiku during perhaps the longest period of peace in any country of the world is probably no coincidence. With the harmony of Japanese poetry as a basis, the haiku became the upaya (skillful means) whereby at any moment anyone could break through and liberate himself, the only problem in the world. The following quotation, from a hairon of about 1813, gives good advice for actual training.

"Beginners should first inquire in detail into the meaning and import of the seasonal word (kigo). When they write on one with which they are familiar, they should again look into and obtain a further grasp of its

deep nature. As for those seasonal topics that are not familiar, one should discover what they mean. The princely person is not ashamed to inquire of someone whose rank is below his. One should study the writings of those who have gone before, of course; one should ask of one's companions, and even those of lesser standing than oneself, many times. Not to ask is to bring about a lifetime of disadvantage and loss...."

The old test of a good haiku was to replace the kigo by another. If the ku was just as good with the replaced word, it was not considered a real haiku. If whatever the ku said could apply to a butterfly as well as a bee, or Spring rain as well as a Summer shower, for example. Let us take the following ku on five different kinds of rain, written by the old masters, and see how the words and idea units are placed to generate the seasonal word.

Spring rain: a soft and gentle rain, which though forlorn if it continues a long while, yet contains the lustre that causes the sprouts of things to come forth and the cherry flowers to bloom.

Spring rain--

under the tree seep

its drops kana --Basho

The drops that follow the tree's boughs and trunk fall slower than the rain proper, moistening them so the tree buds will hasten to come forth. The ku has a deliberate, gentle quality like the kigo.

Fifth Month rains or plum rain: this is the term for the rainy season in Japan, that comes in the lunar Fifth Month, by our calendar around June. It is the rain that causes the plum fruit to grow. A steady rain with occasional stops, it goes on for about 30 days, causing mildew and some amount of discomfort. When it is over, the real warmth and heat of Summer comes on.

These days,

it's turned to a drizzle,

Fifth Month rains. --Shohaku

The first line presumes it has been raining before, to give the feeling

of a long period of continued precipitation.

Summer downpour: the late afternoon downpour preceded by a darkening sky, a rumble or two of thunder, that becomes a common phenomenon in mid- or late summer. It is a torrent often accompanied by wind, and clears as quickly as it comes.

Sudden downpour ya

Cypress-tree fragrance

for that interval. --Kyuken

The first line gives the outgoing force, the second the actual existence of the rain suddenly causing the cypress by its force to emit perfume, and the last line sees a recession of that force and fragrance.

Autumn rain: a fine and often steady rain that is bleak and desolate; amost the reverse of Spring rain, we see nature entering the dark phase of her seasons.

To whom does it belong?

The cotton garment beaten on by

the Autumn rain. --Shohaku

The garment of a farmer or labourer, hanging to dry outside his house, getting a second laundering. The hai lies in the fact that it is, anyway, just a garment without a person in it, which spares the pathos.

Icy rain: the rain that falls under an unsettled, early Winter sky. When one thinks it will clear, it suddenly clouds over; when one thinks it will rain, it doesn't. The Japanese associate this kigo with feet that walk quickly (because the rain is cold). Another name for it is yama-meguri, going around the mountains, because this rain moves in that way, one peak shining, one peak being rained on.

Listen!

An icy shower comes; night's

temple bell. --Kikaku

With the sudden sound of this icy shower the voice of a temple bell announcing dusk is heard; the first a chilling, fine sound, the second

a slow and sombre one.

From the school of Masaoka Shiki, the following are examples of the same five kinds of rain, for comparison.

Spring rain ya
The barnyard fowl doze on
straw bales. --Kogetsu

In the water jug
a frog afloat,
Fifth Month rains. --Shiki

In the sudden downpour
the morning-glory fence
toppled keri --Gakusho

The Autumn rain
makes them sink under water,
lotus leaves kana --Suibo

The unsold
sea slugs-- in their tub,
twilight icy rain. --Kyoson

As Japanese poetry reached to every common person's parlour in the form of poem cards, a game in which the two halves of a poem are matched, so haiku was brought to the common people by Shiki. After Issa, the haiku had dwindled towards obscurity as Japan was struggling with the problems of opening the country to foreigners. Shiki's genius quickly discovered that everyone was endowed with an instinct for the real, and therefore could not anyone write haiku? Of course this is true, but his mistake seems to be that this was merely to be done by the hit and miss method, with none of the training or study absolutely required, though desirable. While people of the Basho school were trained to write on any

seasonal topic at any time of year, those of the Shiki school were advised to go out to the fields and look at the violets or the butterflies and write on them. His theory of *shasei*, put down what's there, is an enormous simplification of Basho's play between the void and actual. At the point of the emergence of the last flowering of the *kali yuga* when all true roads are replaced by their false counterparts, as the sages predicted, there was perhaps no other way. The people of weaker understanding, prone to laziness and attracted to superficialities, how could they become interested in real study (how truer this is in our age). Nevertheless, those around Shiki were still physically close to favorable conditions and environment, not all of the classical ways had been given up, and his popular movement did achieve a great comeback of haiku in simplified form. Although it was as soon to awaken spurious and counter-haiku--inevitable if the masses plunge into something they only imagine they understand--the number of people who tried and succeeded in producing good haiku were as many as in the thousands, perhaps.

The one thing which the Shiki school kept that provided its strength was the *saijiki* or dictionary of haiku *kigo*. *Saijiki* originally meant "records of the events of the year", and contained information handed down through the centuries pertaining to everyday life and ways of doing things in accordance with the seasons. The *haijin* altered it slightly to suit their convenience, and organized it according to the five seasons (new year being one), with the seasonal words classified into seven categories: the overall climatic characteristics of the season (beginning of Spring, Spring equinox, last day of Winter, etc.), things that belong to heaven (the Autumn wind, Spring rain, thunder, etc.), things that belong to earth (Summer mountain, Winter ocean, etc.), affairs of people (ploughing the fields, changing to Summer garments, etc.), Shinto or Buddhist affairs (special festivals or pilgrimages), plants, and animals.

Each of the kigo defined in detail, examples of variations (different names or expressions for the kigo) given, there follow a number of model haiku. The saijiki is one of the most popular books in Japan, and many five-volumed, illustrated editions are available everywhere. If one looks into such a dictionary and finds, for example, the item Wheat's Autumn in the Summer volume under climactic changes, it might say something like:

The time when the wheat ripens and is harvested. Autumn stands for the ripening of all other grains, so that "Wheat's Autumn" distinguishes itself as early Summer. Also called Bakushu (Chinese reading of same ideograms), one of the old names for the lunar 4th month. Ripened wheat is of slightly different hue from ripened rice, and the sound they give if a breeze goes through them, again of another tone. During the harvest which takes place usually in early Summer, the farmers can be seen busy with their work till nightfall.

By way of Ise / walk around Yamato province; / wheat's Autumn.

--Kito

A wind blowing, / wheat Autumn's / middle kana --Roka

Dusk ya / In the fields voices linger, / wheat's Autumn

--Soshu

Wheat's Autumn: / on the temple bell a layer of / dust kana

--Jogetsu

Island after island's / terraced fields ya / Wheat's Autumn.

--Shinejo

In wheat Autumn's/ dust it gets muddied, / the west sun kana

--Kasetsu

The reader may have noticed that writers of haiku commonly have names of 2 or 3 syllables. The changing of names is an old practice in Japanese life, meant to signify a new period in someone's life--entering adulthood, becoming a monk, or--in the case of tea masters, painters,

sculptors, potters, and haijin--an attaining to the mastery of that art. So the haijin, when they attained self-liberation, were given a haimei by their teacher. He is then no longer the person he was born as, Matsuo Munefusa, but just Banana Leaf, or Turnip Village (Buson). The name is often connected with something in the man's nature related to the way mastery ^{is} attained, or with some predominant characteristic. It means he is no longer that weak chap full of misconceptions. It follows, then, that the meaning of "personal" is really "impersonal", in the view of an unworldly person.

Since the means for Westerners to study the haiku of the Basho school do not exist, though hopefully someday they will, Europeans should begin with the school of Shiki (up to 1935). If you want to create haiku, the first step should be a construction of a saijiki for your own country: observe the changes which occur in the seasons, and set up and define the kigo. Westerners should not write in syllables, unless, like the Japanese language, theirs is a language in which no vowels are reduced (such as Latin, Spanish). What might be the social impact of a real haiku movement? An improvement in the language and behaviour of people.